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Abigail Caldwell
Universtiy of Texas at Austin

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University of Texas at Austin

During the first half of the twentieth century, the model American mom was a white, suburban, middle-class woman who embraced her maternal side, even during World War II.[1] Wartime articles added to these roles as wives and mothers and expected women to express patriotism through a commitment to the home front.[2] Their duty was to bolster morale and preserve the American ideals of freedom, democracy, and sacrifice by supporting the "right side" of a just war and welcoming the adversities that come with fighting it.[3] Letters from white, stay-at-home mothers to their military husbands show how those standards played out in real life. While print media called for feminine stoicism, correspondences from moms uncovered the profound effects of financial and emotional hardships caused by raising children in the absence of fathers. As a result, these moms disregarded the model of wartime femininity endorsed in

[1] Jodi Vandenberg-Davis, "Mothers of Invention: World War II to Present," in *Modern Motherhood, An American History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 174.

[2] Emily Yellin, "To Bring Him Home Safely: Wives, Mothers, and Sisters of Servicemen," in *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 12.

[3] Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson Inc., 2012), 33.

print and demonstrated more independence and self-sufficiency than ever, fulfilling their patriotic duty in their own way.

Before World War II, new forms of print media and a budding consumerism set the norms for women. In keeping with the drive to sell to new customers, advertisements and magazines targeted wives and mothers as consumers of household goods.[4] Women in ads were always white, modestly dressed, feminine from head to toe, and pictured at home. Their depictions expressed submissiveness, fragility, and, above all, a desire to embrace their roles as homemakers.

The First World War and its demands on the home front shifted this model: the nation needed women to contribute beyond being wives and mothers. To answer the nation's calls for help, thousands formed or joined voluntary wartime organizations like the United War Work Campaign.[5] Women became less reliant on the men who left to fight, and their contributions to the war effort offered them a sense of greater independence and purpose. Both the war and the woman's suffrage campaign that followed it encouraged activism and broader participation in public life.[6] Women supported causes such as the "housewives' movement" during the Great Depression and participated in food boycotts and anti-eviction protests.[7] Americans increasingly accepted women as free-thinking and capable members of society, and their roles evolved further

[4] Jodi Vandenberg-Davis, "Mother's Resilience and Adopting to Modern America," in *Modern Motherhood, An American History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 151.

[5] "Pins and Buttons," *Women in World War I,* National Museum of American History: Behring Center, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object-groups/women-in-wwi/pins-buttons.

[6] Penny Summerfield, "Gender and War in the Twentieth Century," *The International History Review* 19, no. 1 (1997), 2-15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40108080.

[7] Vandenburg-Davis, "Mother's Resilience and Adopting to Modern America," 159.

in the Second World War. However, the core characterizations of wife and mother remained unchanged.

World War II posters, most often government-sponsored, portrayed the new example for American housewives and merged old ideals with contemporary ones. The poster-women donned aprons and enjoyed manicured nails but also flaunted strong, steady arms and determined facial expressions.[8] The total war morphed the feminine model and mixed the classic, age-old femininity with new strength and resolve. In the wartime archetype, muscle replaced frailty and undaunted looks overtook friendly smiles as the need for an ever-productive home front increased. The women who did not enter the workforce for war production (like many mothers) could and needed to advance the war effort from their homes.

The posters emphasized that homemakers could contribute to the war effort through their daily routine. By lauding patriotic activities such as growing victory gardens, donating to scrap metal drives, and saving kitchen fats, homemakers could do their part, and mothers could teach their children that freedom and democracy came with sacrifice.[9] To keep morale in check, women needed to lead by example and personify American values with a content disposition. The posters combined images of practices in the home with the activities on the front lines and tied housewives' and mothers' domestic labor to the war's success.[10] The time for separate spheres of influence was diminishing; features such as hardened faces and toned arms now marked men and women alike. War demanded strength from both genders.

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[8] Sara Harrington, "Women's Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 22, no. 2 (2003), 41-44, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27949264.

[9] Winkler, *Homefront U.S.A.,* 31.

[10] Sara Harrington, "Women's Work," 42.

As the posters displayed, WWII complicated the image of femininity as total war emphasized and broadened the contradictions in the standard for women.[11] The expectations placed on them now encompassed national needs without abandoning a focus on the traditional functions of wives and mothers. Media and propaganda encouraged these women to "keep the home fires burning" while still contributing to the war effort. They needed to preserve their husbands' places at home while simultaneously filling them by managing the finances and disciplining their children.[12] Despite the new roles they needed to juggle, women as nurturing homemakers and mothers remained paramount. Government propaganda and mass media maintained that mothers were the "cornerstone" of the home and hence the nation.[13] Keeping with this standard, articles during the war called for women, and mothers especially, to exemplify an acceptance of the struggles of wartime and a willingness to tackle them with grace. By happily doing so, they could fulfill their duty to maintain morale.

American authors like Lawrence K. Frank connected the family to national morale. *The Family in a World at War* (1942), a book planned by the Board and Staff of the Child Study Association of America, featured Frank's article "The Family in a National Emergency." Frank was an American social scientist and parent educator, and his essay advocated for the family's maintenance of esprit de corps during the war.[14] He foresaw the looming difficulties for families in wartime and lamented the insufficient and inadequate programs meant to help with such

[11] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998; HathiTrust), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015046482405.

[12] *Ibid*., 47

[13] *Ibid.,* 80.

[14] Lawrence K. Frank, "The Family in the National Emergency," in *The Family in a World at War*, ed. Sidionie Matsner Gruenberg (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1942), 56-68.

troubles. Despite the rough waters ahead, Frank pressed on the importance of keeping spirits up in the family and argued that "the task of building up and maintaining morale" depended on "what aspirations and what faith in human values we can muster in families."[15] Lawrence's call to households applied mostly to women, who became the heads of their homes after their husbands departed for war. Such articles tasked wives and mothers with fostering the esprit de corps on the home front and emphasized the high stakes situation of war. Lawrence concluded that "to ask for...help to the morale of the family" is "not a plea for the family alone but for the larger need and greater difficulties we face as a nation."[16] The family's attitude was a determining factor in the spirit of the nation and needed sharp attention.

Other authors wrote directly to women, like Ethel Gorham and her handbook for wives of servicemen, *So Your Husband's Gone to War!* Gorham, a fashion writer, war wife, and mother, advised readers of the importance of continued contact with loved ones and explained the best way to write to husbands on the front. A significant component to the exchange of correspondences, as Gorham described it, was the inevitable delays of postal delivery. Wives responded to week- or even month-old letters, and what they wrote about themselves and their children was long-past when their husbands read them.[17] With morale in mind, Gorham encouraged writing about the home front but advised women to avoid personal problems that would distress the soldiers. Women often disregarded this advice (or, perhaps, only shared what they deemed dire issues). Whatever their worries, wives writing to their husbands could not

[15] *Ibid.,* 67.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Ethel Gorham, excerpt from *So Your Husbands Gone to War*!, in *American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II*, ed. Judy Barret Littoff and David C. Smith (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 149.

forget the war effort and their obligation to it: preserving hope. As Gorham's article suggests, wartime etiquette shaped women's letters as much as the day-to-day events they described.

Many of these day-to-day realities meant that women's efforts towards morale were small and personal, as the letters of stay-at-home moms conveyed. When Geraldine Kiefaber, mother to a three-year-old boy, wrote to her husband Paul after his departure, she assured him, "I hope to keep smiling too and I have Billy [their son] to help me over the bad spots."[18] Though Geraldine knew that "bad spots" loomed ahead, she remained confident in her ability to handle them. She accepted the situation and acknowledged that duty called even with her husband away. To smile through the changes was a small way for Geraldine to keep her spirits up.

Marjorie Haselton, who was pregnant and already the mother of a young girl, also opted to focus on the little mood-lifters, such as the weather. She wrote to her husband, "let's hope for a sunny day tomorrow and a more cheerful outlook."[19] Like Geraldine, Marjorie voiced hope. She wanted sunshine and an improved perspective, which helped her keep afloat in these trying times. Neither woman thought about their actions on a national scale, but both looked on the bright side in their individual lives when possible. Though not made consciously for the war effort, this choice boosted the morale of their family and, on a large scale, the country.

The mothers sending letters to the front mentioned their problems but afterwards voiced their faith in a brighter future. Marjorie discussed her lonesomeness with her far-away lover but

[18] Geraldine S. Kiefaber to Paul Kiefaber, Arlington, 13 April 1944, as quoted in *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Homefront*, ed. Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13.

[19] Marjorie Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 25 May 1944, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 97-98.

followed up with, "I haven't cried and I won't."[20] Marjorie did not have control over her feelings but exerted the little power she did possess to keep them under the surface. By refusing to cry, Marjorie clung to the hope that the separation was temporary and that, one day, she would not have to fight tears at all. This approach adhered to what American publishers expected of women: feel what you must, but keep it at bay for the sake of the popular morale. Hilda Rice, who had three older children, regretted that her Sea Bee husband would miss their wedding anniversary but concluded, "oh well, there's better days coming and we can make up for it then."[21] Women recognized that bemoaning their troubled circumstances could not ameliorate them. Instead, these moms favored optimism to cope with the hardships. Hopeful remarks uplifted the men reading the letters and raised morale for the women penning them. Taking the brief comments to heart was a critical step in avoiding sorrow for mothers married to servicemen.

Economic concerns inhibited American mothers from uplifting morale and teaching democratic ideals. Women with husbands on the war front, and mothers, in particular, suffered from financial difficulties. Draftees received less pay than husbands who remained at home, so service families often lived on low incomes and had trouble making ends meet.[22] While war industries and labor shortages gave women greater work opportunities, mothers could not easily leave behind their children. Often, they chose to use family savings or borrow from family

[20] Marjorie Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 24 September 1944, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 106.

[21] Hilda Rice to Reuben Rice, Waterbury, 1 March 1945, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away,* 109.

[22] D'ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 190.

members instead of working outside of the home and paying for childcare.[23] The simple fact of having more mouths to feed and more bodies to clothe than women without children meant that war-time mothers faced greater economic strains. With their husbands serving in the war, mothers raised their children and sorted out financial troubles on their own with little help from paltry military salaries.

Stay-at-home mothers writing to their husbands on the war front were honest about their financial burdens, which detracted from their expected commitment to patriotism. Marjorie Haselton wrote to her husband about her economic troubles in 1944. She admitted, "my financial worries keep my mind in a torment."[24] In one desperate letter, Marjorie even included a chart of monthly expenditures that revealed a mere $8.00 left over for clothing, medicine, heat, newspapers, and amusement.[25] Not only did tight money threaten physical health in unheated quarters without sufficient medications or even food, but it also added stress to the tired and worried mothers. A mother from New York, Natalie, voiced similar concerns. She mentioned starting to use their savings and fretted, "when that's gone, well, we won't eat, that's all…"[26] A mother nervous about feeding her children could not realistically accept her situation without complaint for the sake of morale. For some moms, obtaining the necessary funds for food occurred only after expressing their difficulties.

[23] *Ibid.*, 194.

[24] Marjorie Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 19 July 1944, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away,* 104.

[25] Marjorie Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 8 August 1944, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 105.

[26] Natalie Maddalena to Frank Maddalena, New York, 27 July 1944, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 246.

These mothers had lived relatively comfortable lives before their husbands' departure and had never experienced such hardships alone. As a result, American moms learned how to mitigate economic problems independently while taking care of their children. Hilda Rice handled the taxes and wrote, "I have to go down early and pay my personal tax as this is the last day."[27] As the war went on, women gained confidence in the economic realm. However comfortable moms felt in dealing with it, money occupied their thoughts and dictated daily plans. Mothers' financial stressors overshadowed the demands to maintain morale for the nation, which mattered little to women struggling to pay the bills and learn the ropes of finances. Their fiscal worries might have detracted from the expectations to exemplify American values with a smile, but they brought about a new kind of mothering—one with newfound financial know-how and sources of security beyond their husbands.[28]

Published books expected a different response. Women like Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, an American author and equal rights advocate, were aware of the war's economic burdens on homemakers and offered optimistic outlooks. Though intended to help, their articles sometimes isolated women suffering financially. Greenbie published *The Art of Living in Wartime* in 1943 to provide advice for women during the international crisis. Her chapter "The Ingenious Art of Doing Without" centered around the financial strain of war. Instead of combatting direct issues such as rationing and inflation, Greenbie focused on the benefits of economic strain. She called attention to the "satisfaction that millions of good people get out of doing without" and how "the

[27] Hilda Rice to Reuben Rice, Waterbury, 1 March 1945, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 109.

[28] Campbell, *Women at War With America*, 194.

sense of sharing…more than compensates for the loss of material comfort."[29] Furthermore, she defined "doing without" as exhilarating and artistic and claimed that "as long as you struggle, you will not be depressed."[30]

Greenbie's ideas were bright and reassuring—doubtless invaluable traits during war—but unrealistic. With assertions that "good" people enjoy doing without, Greenbie isolated the women who resented their economic hardship, and faultlessly so. While uplifting to some, her zeal might have invalidated the feelings of others who were less keen to embrace the merits of doing without. Stoicism was a key feature to the new ideals of womanhood emerging during total war, and Greenbie encouraged it.

Some men tried to understand and tackle the issue of finances for war wives and mothers, but they, too, imposed impractical expectations. Eduard C. Lindeman was another American educator and author featured in *The American Family in a World at War*. His article, "The American Family: Flexible and Resilient," sympathized with families who would suffer financially as a result of war but made clear that such hardship should avoid undercutting the American ideals of freedom and democracy. He explained, "we cannot prevent the rise of a war economy, but we can, by thinking and acting, prevent the war economy from destroying those values upon which our democratic experience rests."[31]

[29] Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, "The Ingenious Art of Doing Without," in *The Art of Living in Wartime* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 109.

[30] *Ibid.,* 109-114.

[31] Eduard C. Lindeman, "The American Family: Flexible and Resilient," in Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, ed., *Family in a World at War*, 73.

Lindeman outlined an important distinction for American families between what they could not control, like entering the war, and what they could and needed to manage, like preserving American principles. Heads of families, which wives became when their husbands went to fight, had the responsibility of maintaining democratic tenets in the face of financial strain. Mothers in particular needed to raise their children with this duty in mind. Lindeman summarized his argument by claiming that "in order to survive the type of attack...embodied in the anti-democratic forces of our time, the family will also be required to reveal qualities of flexibility."[32] The family was a fighting force for American democracy, and wives and mothers needed to take part in the fight.

While receiving guidance from authors like Greenbie and Lindeman, mothers left alone on the home front faced another problem: loneliness. Isolation was common to all wives and sweethearts of servicemen, but mothers suffered more than most. Child-rearing often limited their time for social activities, and their new responsibilities regarding money, work, children, and household problems burdened them and emphasized their emotional difficulties.[33] One study, published in 1948, examined 100 families near the University of Chicago; half had children, most were middle or upper-middle class, and almost all were highly educated.[34] Two-thirds experienced moderate to severe loneliness during the war. Most full-time mothers faced considerable loneliness as opposed to working women, who encountered moderate or little.[35] Children were no substitute for adult companions. On the other hand, work, something

[32] *Ibid.*, 82.

[33] Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 191.

[34] *Ibid*., 190.

[35] *Ibid*., 191.

unavailable or undesirable for many mothers, eased the effect of emotional seclusion. Parenthood could have also deepened the companionate relationship in marriage, making mothers more susceptible to feelings of loneliness when the fathers had to leave.

Letters from home echoed this sentiment and showed the emotional element that impeded mothers' commitment to maintaining American principles and esprit de corps. Anna Beadle, with two young children, shared with her husband in the Pacific, "you've never left my thoughts one instant in the past two days and nights" and "it hurts so much. Love shouldn't hurt this way."[36] Though her daily duties occupied her, Anna's persistent longing for her husband never left her mind. For women like her, the pain of far-away loved ones was constant and never dulled by children, much less their duty to keep up morale for the country. Geraldine Kiefaber also spoke of such ever-present thoughts of her husband in the war. In one letter, she described one of her nights: "I thought of you trying to sleep on the bus and wondered how you were feeling as I watched the hands of the clock go round."[37] Geraldine's hours spent thinking of her husband captured how war wives' meaning of time changed with their partners away. As the minutes and days ticked by, their thoughts remained on their spouses—not the national attitude or the liberties of democracy. Mothers needed sleep to care for their young children, but the pain from the absences of their men persisted into the night and eclipsed the expectations of a nation at war.

Mothers' letters incorporated the feelings of their children, too. At the same time that Marjorie dealt with her budgeting bind, she lamented to her husband, "I am lonesome—so

[36] Anna Beadle to Clinton Beadle, New Athens, 9 February 1945, in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 14.

[37] Geraldine S. Kiefaber to Paul Kiefaber, Arlington, 13 April 1944, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since you Went Away*, 13.

lonesome for you and Meri [her daughter] and I could cry until I died!"[38] Marjorie exhibited her own sorrow and compounded it with her young daughter's yearnings for her father. The emotional turmoil suffered by children added to feelings of isolation and forlornness. One mother helped her six-year-old daughter, Ruth, write to her dad and ask, "are you very lonesome?" and added, "we are all lonesome for you."[39] Another mom transcribed her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter's writings, which included "give Daddy a kiss" and "I love Daddy."[40] The war presented a dual emotional burden for mothers with husbands in the service as each woman strove to maintain contact with her spouse and ensure that her children, regardless of age, could do the same. Maintaining family connection and safeguarding the new long-distance relationships took precedence in mothers' lives and kept up the family morale, of which the national impact was a secondary byproduct. Mothers and children focused on their individual soldiers, not the armed forces as a whole.

The added strain that came with raising the children of servicemen becomes abundantly clear with a story from Isabel Kidder, mother of two, in 1943:

> Joel [her son] was talking to me before he went to sleep last night and he said, 'do you know I'd like it better if Daddy went to work in the morning and came home every night.' And I said I would too, only that thousands of little boys' 'Daddies had to be gone at the war,' and he said, 'and thousands of them will get killed too.' That old bugbear never leaves him. I always wish I could reassure him somehow, and whatever I... say seems so inadequate.[41]

[38] Marjorie Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 24 September 1944, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since You Went Away*, 106.

[39] Ruth Erling, to Bertil A. Erling, Pennock, 1943, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since You Went Away,* 16-17.

[40] Meredith Haselton to Richard S. Haselton, Athol, 25 May 1944, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since You Went Away*, 16.

[41] Isabel Kidder to Maurice A. Kidder, Durham, 14 August 1943, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since You Went Away*, 96.

Such comments prompted mothers to put on a brave face for their children. After all, they were not the only ones enduring emotional distress at the time of their husbands' service. Like Isabel, mothers rarely had the words to comfort their children as they grappled with the same pain themselves. Another mother, Natalie, sensing the weight of her children's feelings, wrote how her little boy would say, "Daddy come home now."[42] Natalie would have to explain that daddy could not yet return, a fact that surely hurt her to admit and even more to explain to her child.

Maintaining a composed exterior while suffering inside was an exhausting business, and mothers, while trying not to express it in front of young ones, still longed for their husbands. Perhaps worst of all, the possibility that the fathers of their children might not return loomed over them. Demonstrations of strength despite these worries kept up morale like published articles advocated, but it stemmed not so much from patriotic duty but a need for individual well-being. In the face of such duress, Isabel, Natalie, and other war wives had to regulate their own temperament to sustain a modicum of normality in their lives. This hardship was unique to their situations as wartime mothers and demanded that they adopt a new strength independent of their husbands—for national purposes or not.

The wartime print media emphasized a need for mothers to raise their children the "right way," aligned with the philosophies of American democracy. Many citizens worried about the fate of children with fathers away, and Mary Shattuck Fisher, chairman of the child study department of Vassar College, wrote "Answers Given to Child's Questions About War " in 1942 to ensure that mothers could answer their kids' queries. *Science News Letters* published Fisher's article, in which she admitted that the most challenging questions to tackle were about fathers on

[42] Natalie Maddalena to Frank Maddalena, New York, 8 May 1944, in Litoff and Smith eds., *Since You Went Away,* 245.

the front lines.[43] One suggested answer was, "yes, of course we hope Daddy will come back safe and we believe he will." The recommended response continued, "yes, some men will be killed on our side too, but that is what war means. When our country is attacked, men are proud to fight for their country."[44]

Women like Fisher perceived the difficulties for children with serving fathers and understood how that troubled the mothers. She offered guidance by providing concrete, feasible advice. Fisher still encouraged moms to teach their children about war and sacrifice, but she validated the psychological burdens for family members of servicemen. Articles that offered practical means of meeting war-time expectations continued to hold women to a standard. Fisher, at least, made it easier to reach.

Other authors writing during war failed to grasp the gravity of the emotional strain and reinforced the model of a patriotic homemaker without considering the cost to women. Brigadier-General Lewis B. Hershey was the director of the Selective Service System during World War II, and his "The Impact of the Draft on the American Family" explained the nature of the draft and how its implementation affected families. Like many wartime authors, he acknowledged the challenges but argued that women needed to overcome them. He observed that, in a draftee's family, "[grief, financial strain, and anxiety] are usually matched by moral values which accrue to that family, strengthening it and enriching it."[45]

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[43] Document 72, in *Beyond Rosie: A Documentary History of Women and World War II* eds. Julia Brock, Jennifer W. Dickey, Richard Harker, and Catherine Lewis (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), Accessed May 6, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central, 132-133.

[44] *Ibid.*, 133.

[45] Lewis B. Hershey, "The Impact of the Draft on the American Family," in Sidione Matsner Gruenberg, ed., *Family in a World at War*, 107.

Rather than instructing how to manage the emotional suffering, Hershey simply assured that the pain and worry would bring honor to the soldier's family and make its members tougher. As those left behind were often women, Hershey appealed to their duties as wives and mothers to be moral backbones of the family. Mothers in particular needed to instill in their children the honored values that explained the importance of their fathers' absences. Hershey insisted that "the American family is the nation," linking the success of families to the success of the country and placing a responsibility on those raising families to carry the nation to victory.[46] Mothers with husbands in the war added this burden to their long list, even if those expectations rarely crossed their minds.

American authors who wrote to advise women during war intended to uplift and encourage them in a national emergency. Nonetheless, their demands for women to exemplify democratic ideals and maintain morale in the home continued women's traditional obligations to family life and set a high bar for wives and mothers just as their lives became more difficult. The letters to their husbands conveyed that everyday financial and emotional stressors, not duties to the nation, occupied women's minds more than anything. The emotional turmoil and the economic stress that they felt made life especially hard, but they rose to the challenge not only for themselves but for their children. Women in their situations had rarely been so independent, and they used their increased autonomy to concentrate on feasibility and coping rather than nationally-promoted expectations. This growing self-sufficiency molded motherhood through the war and beyond: World War II mothers demonstrated that women could successfully raise their children in their own ways.

[46] *Ibid.,* 109.

About the author

Abigail Caldwell is a junior at the University of Texas at Austin. She studies history in the Liberal Arts Honors program and is a Jefferson Scholar and Normandy Scholar. She also studies Core Texts and Ideas and Spanish.

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